

Head , Hands and Hearts!

Jane Revell

We all know by now that mind and body – HEAD and HANDS - are connected. Theories of Accelerated Learning and Neuro-Linguistic Programming have been emphasising their interdependence over the years and Eastern philosophies have been saying so for centuries.

Negative and positive thinking

We know, for example, that when our mind is not OK, when we are thinking 'negatively' and are distressed or anxious for long periods of time, that our body responds negatively: those are the times when we tend to get run down physically, are often bothered by various aches and pains and are sometimes ill. We also know that when our head is OK, when we are thinking 'positively' and are happy and at peace with ourselves, that our body responds positively: those are the times we tend to be in top physical condition and able to achieve lots of things.

The whole idea of self-fulfilling prophecies fits in here: how we think about something (another person, a place, an event, a classroom activity ... and, most crucially, *ourselves*) influences how we behave and therefore what happens as a result.

We know that this works in reverse too. If our body is not OK, then our mind follows suit. If we sit for long stretches of time without moving, our mind slows down as well as our body. If we get up and move around, then the boost to our circulation sends more oxygen to our brain and our thinking improves.

Application to the learning environment

Many of us have already applied these ideas to the learning environment. We help young learners to learn and perform to the best of their ability by encouraging them to think positively and to feel good about themselves. We have also introduced more and more physical activities into the classroom, either as a kinaesthetic part of the activity itself or else by 'punctuating' an otherwise static lesson with brief stretches or physical exercises. And those of us who practise Brain Gym ® know that when learners do certain movements and exercises with different parts of their body, they can get their brain to work even better. A good idea any time, and especially just before a test!

The emotional side of things

So what about HEART?!

'Tell me and I forget. Involve me and I remember.'

We learn and remember best what we learn with emotion, what we take to heart.

Think back to your own school days for a moment. What are your strongest memories of those days? What events come to mind? Which teachers? Which subjects?

Most of you will probably recall events that sparked off strong emotions in you. The teachers you remember best will be the ones you really liked - who were enthusiastic or who made you laugh or with whom you

had a special relationship, and also the ones you really disliked - perhaps because they frightened you or bullied you in some way. (I have both sorts of memories.) And of course, your feelings about the teacher are likely to have affected your feelings about the subject and coloured what you subsequently learnt or didn't learn.

This is all down to a naturally-occurring biochemical reaction in our body. Whenever we have an experience which is emotionally charged, our body produces hormones such as adrenaline and noradrenaline. These hormones (which are the hormones produced as part of the stress-response mechanism) seem to strengthen the memory's storage capacity by leaving very vivid images in the brain.

So how can we engender emotion-arousing experiences (preferably positive ones!) in the classroom? Well, you're probably doing so already, if you're using songs and stories. These are both potentially exciting – and therefore memorable - for young learners, but – and it's a big 'but' - a lot depends on both the material you use and the way you exploit it.

Choose your songs and stories with care, not just for their linguistic input but, more crucially, for their degree of interest and motivational impact for your age group. Obviously you can't expect your learners to cope with a text which is way beyond their L2 competence, but it's surprising how much effort they will make to grasp a song or story they really like, even though it contains a fair amount of unknown grammar or vocabulary.

As for how you use your material, it's easy to overdo it and turn the experience from a magical moment into a boring question and answer session or a heavy piece of grammar practice, and kill it stone dead. We need to be careful to balance enjoyment (heart) and exploitation (head).

An additional problem for us is that today's youngsters are exposed to lots of sophisticated and highly exciting songs and stories, mainly on screens of one sort or another. If we can't (or don't want to) offer that in the classroom, then we need to make sure that what we do is emotionally engaging in other ways, at the same time as providing a vehicle for language learning.

Interestingly, physical movement often provokes an emotional response - excitement and/or laughter - so one way is to ask for a physical response instead of - or as well as - a verbal response. With songs, this might take the form of 'action' songs, where certain words are accompanied or replaced by movement or mime. With stories, this could be a sort of TPR (total physical response) or acting out. At a very simple level, it could be asking the students to stand up or put their hand up every time they hear a certain word repeated in the story.

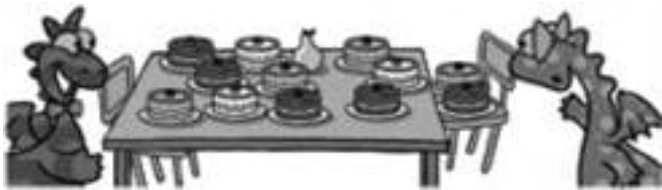
Another way of engendering emotion-arousing experiences in the classroom, of course, is to use games. Nothing new there. But what might be a new idea is the (very old) idea of using drills in a game-like way. Game-drills.

Game -drills

A game-drill is a very simple way of doing a repetition drill to make it thought-provoking (head), physical (hands) and adrenaline-producing (heart). Now I know drills are not cool these days: every time I ask a group of teachers 'How many of you use repetition drills?' I get a very lukewarm response. But I think learners (and not just highly auditory learners) can benefit a lot from drills – I certainly have in my own language-learning past. And drills don't have to be boring and mechanical.

All you need is a picture to make statements about, using a particular structure. Any picture will do, as long as everybody can see it clearly: a small picture in their course book or a large picture held up or projected. Any structure will do, as long as it ties in with your picture.

Here's my picture. The structure we're practising is *There's...* and *There are...*



Here's what I do. I make true or false statements about the picture.

If what I say is *true*, then the students must immediately nod their heads, say 'Yes!' and repeat the statement.

If what I say is *false*, then the students must immediately shake their heads and say 'No! That's not true!'

Even though this particular drill forces the students to count, it's important to insist on a reasonably fast response to get the adrenaline flowing (though it's a good idea to give them some time to look at the picture before you start.). I also insist on a wholehearted response

rather than a tentative one and get them to practise this. What happens when they get it wrong sometimes (as they inevitably do)? Everyone bursts out laughing.

The drill for the picture above would go something like this (and because it's lots of fun, it could go on for a whole lot longer than indicated here):

T: There are ten cakes on the table.
Ss: (nodding) Yes! There are ten cakes on the table.
T: There are two cakes on the chair.
Ss: (nodding) Yes! There are two cakes on the chair.
T: There's a pear on the chair.
Ss (shaking..) No! That's not true.
T: There are five pink cakes.
Ss (shaking..) No! That's not true..... (and so on.)

In case you're wondering why the students aren't asked to correct the false statements instead of just to say 'No! That's not true!' well they are sometimes. But in this instance there are several ways of correcting, so it could all get a bit ragged, as well as slow the pace down considerably. I find too that students enjoy shouting out 'No! That's not true!' and do so with great gusto! After all, it's not often that they get to say such things in the classroom!

Our mind is reflective, our body is active and our emotions are affective. These three things together make for learning which is highly effective. Head, hands and heart.

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Picturebooks and creativity: an interview with Nick Sharratt

Janet Enever



Janet Enever talks with best-selling children's author and illustrator, Nick Sharratt, about books, children and creativity.

JE: Can I ask you to explain where you start when you're creating a new book?

NS: Well, there are two ways that I start a book. One is, if I'm given a problem to solve by a publisher, which might be something like a specific theme, a novelty device or an unusual format to exploit. For example, I was given a book made of tracing paper and asked, what can you come up with from this? Instantly, the semi-opaque quality of the paper got me very excited and I thought "fog" - and that was my starting point. Sometimes I'm given a specific requirement and I find it really helps me.